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"THE BOARD" AND THE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

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The teacher of English in the Northern Atlantic States need scarcely be reminded that the College Entrance Examination Board has furnished forth annually enough for a year's feast of honest argument. In no section of the country, however, has discussion of the Board's function and judgment of its competency (I am speaking always here for the subject of English) been tempered by more patient consideration than in the New England States. The explanation lies, presumably, in the fact that in these states the substance and associations of college education are traditionally familiar, and the need of consistent and respected entrance standards is therefore taken for granted. In other quarters of the country, however—and there is no great novelty in this bit of news—the critical attitude is less indulgent. And whatever absence of affection seems evident may be traced, judging from appearances, to much the same psychology as rules the Middle Western farmer's attitude toward "Big Business"—a suspicion that organization on a large scale carries with it arbitrary and harsh administration, and entrenches privilege.

Let us interpret the smile. The College Entrance Board was established by Eastern colleges, primarily, for the purpose of co-ordinating, interpreting, and administering their requirements for entrance. It does not fix these requirements. In English, for example, they are defined from time to time by delegates from associations of educators in English representing the Eastern States generally, and both school and college experience and opinion. The Board

accepts their definition of requirements as a mandate, and bases its examinations upon their statement and intent. In setting the type of examination, therefore, the Board acts simply as agent for an independent body which reflects both the school and the college point of view. In the interpretation of entrance requirements, however, the Board must in the nature of things exercise some initiative. Its examiners confront the practical questions of presenting the requirements to its candidates with fairness both to school and to college. Its readers always confront the necessity of deciding in concrete terms what quality of performance is satisfactory and what is not. In these two latter functions the Entrance Board speaks and acts largely for traditional colleges and a traditional culture still rather conservatively viewed; and whatever educational force it exerts is grounded in this fact.

In its administrative aspect the Board has become a meeting ground of high school and college opinion upon many questions of examination policy and practice which were once viewed rather arbitrarily by the colleges alone. In this single fact, I should say, lies its great strength as an educational institution. Not merely in its representative personnel but in the actual work of its examiners and readers, it brings into strong and effectual contact the partly conjoined and partly conflicting views and interests of the school and the college teacher. So it concentrates upon the entire examination problem the experience of these two chapters in the educational order: serving as a defence both against a merely scholastic view of subjects for study, and against a super-sensitiveness to the external pressure upon educational ideals, a pressure which may be felt in the whole range of feelings brought to bear upon teaching, from pure utilitarianism to pure sentimentality.

Taking for granted, then, the Board's function of representing the college view of competency to do college work, we are faced with the essential conservatism of the Eastern sense of the relation between college and high school work. The large state universities of the Middle West, maintained as they are by the tax payers, have conducted a vast experiment in "democratized education," accepting all comers with the credentials of a reputable high school, and directing their education, generally speaking, to some definite technical or professional end. Whether this experiment has produced results superior to those of the East is a

question for the educators—and the tax payers—of the next generation to decide. In any event, an entirely different situation is faced by institutions which depend upon tuition fees—helped out by impressive but always inadequate endowments—to carry on their work. They must accept the man whose successful passing of an entrance test argues his ability to do college work. Since the student does not pay the full cost of his education, and since the limit of their resources prescribe limits to the number of their students, they must ask better promise of achievement than is given by mere graduation from a high school, and particularly so because the high school of today exists for more immediate social ends than preparing boys for college. It cannot be argued, however, that the examination plan works with uniform fairness to the typical candidate, or with wholly gratifying results for the college. College preparation has become a highly specialized educational program in our day, and it is, largely speaking, at the command of those with the money to buy it. So just as the "convertible value" of a college education, and the ease of admission, have produced in the State universities an overflow of men not liberally endowed with the intelligence that high academic attainment should require, in the Eastern universities the social value of the older college education, and the ease of entrance for the man who can purchase admission (by attending a successful preparatory school) have given these universities a surplusage of men without real intellectual ambition, without a real cultural outlook, and without the habit of work. As between the two plans of entrance, however, there can be no doubt that a carefully planned and well administered examination system is the better for a college that can afford to work only with selected material, and that feels that its service to the community should be valued upon some other standard than that of factory efficiency.

Any question of the adequacy and fairness of the examination system as far as it concerns a particular subject, is concerned first of all with whether the right kind of material goes through the sieve. English is not only in itself as significant a test as any single subject of the efficacy of the examination system, but it is recognized as in superior degree a test of general mental capacity. In the judicial eyes of any committee on admission its value as evidence is very high. Is it rightly so? And are the possibilities in this respect at all fully realized? The

answers hinge both on the fitness of the requirements, and the judgment and care of examiners and readers.

Much of the argument upon the problem of examinations is concerned with the statement of requirements, a very important matter in itself, but one which lies, as I have said, quite outside the province of the Board, and beyond its direct power to change. It is in addition a problem upon which is centered every possible hue of opinion, with no very marked consensus on the part of any largely representative group of either high-school or college teachers. With the present plan of alternative requirements—on the one hand a limited reading list and an actually confined study list, on the other hand complete freedom of choice both as to content and method of preparatory work—it would seem inevitable that there should soon be a gravitation of either public high-school or preparatory school teachers toward either one scheme or the other. Curiously enough, however, the comprehensive program, which would seem to be specially adapted to the general purpose and method of public high-school courses has been regarded by the majority of such teachers with whom I have talked as too exacting and too uncertain in its prospect. On the other hand, the preparatory school, which we have customarily accused of teaching a limited but concrete subject-matter to death, seems to offer a warmer welcome to a type of examination which requires much less of mechanical drill, and demands much more of point of view on the part of the student. One teacher objects to the comprehensive type because he feels that in adopting it he would lose a specific discipline similar in spirit and aim to the older study of the classics; another teacher objects to the old type of examination because the minuteness of study which it demands not only may extinguish literary interest, but may be followed by a “cram” teacher with no thought of conveying literary interest. Some college teachers disapprove of the old type because of the limited number of definite questions that may be asked on examination; others look askance at the comprehensive type because of the infinite number of superficial questions that it affords. There is apparently no real unanimity of view among those who teach the subject in preparation for actual examination. Among college teachers, however, and among a very fair proportion of high-school teachers who are not handicapped by insufficient time or equipment, or a very heterogeneous student body, there seems to be a growing conviction that the comprehen-

sive type is better because it follows up a rational, broad, and generally valuable course of study, because it calls for an intelligent assimilation of the student's reading, and most of all because a candidate can furnish for it only what his own mind contains, and not what almost any energetic teacher can plant in almost any frightened boy within the month preceding the final test.

But I must emphasize the fact that the question of the course of study leading up to a defined form of examination is one that is generally decided from the standpoint of the opportunity and convenience of the high-school teacher; and the Entrance Board has no considerable part in the formulation of the choice offered him, and no influence upon his decision. The point at which the Board does affect the end and plan of his teaching is in the preparation and reading of examinations.

It is generally taken for granted that in the administration of the examinations there are discovered sharp and often irreconcilable differences of opinion as between the high-school and the college delegations of readers and examiners. It seems to me that our interest now is concerned primarily with whether, in the first place, there really exist such typical conflicts of judgment with regard to the large matters of aim or system; whether, in the second place, the particular matters of difference may be separated and discussed on their particular merits; and whether, in the third place, differences on these points are really either unreasonable or irreconcilable. And at the beginning of this part of my inquiry, I am constrained to record my own, but I think correct, impression as to the spirit in which such divergence of judgment is encountered in the meetings of either examiners or readers. In my experience as a reader, which has covered twelve years, I have seen no case in which the readers' group has failed to hear fully, thoughtfully, and patiently, all that any individual reader has wished to place before it from the fund of his own ideas and experience. This has been true even when the matter of debate has seemed to be academic, and to have no bearing, or slight bearing, upon the practice of the group. In the examiners' meetings there is the same receptiveness to a new or different idea. Even radical differences of educational faith are brought to bear upon the making of a paper. During my experience with the Board I have seen only one reader and one examiner leave a session with the feeling that what was accomplished was unsatisfactory, within the

limits of intelligent attainment; and in each case the dissenter was, I am very sure, a minority of one. On the other hand, we have constantly welcomed dissatisfied teachers as readers, and have almost uniformly found a changed view at the end of ten days of work with the Board. Difference of judgment is not only tolerated by the workers; it is welcomed. For the fact is quite patent that such difference begets a wider wisdom. Every paper is a compromise. Every conference preceding the annual meeting of a gradually changing board of readers freshens the standard. Differences of opinion are as necessary for the fair and successful conduct of examinations as for horse-races, commodity markets, and social progress.

It is not generally true, however, that such differences touch the large matters of aim and system with which serious teachers are concerned. In the end it is generally and rather remarkably true that collisions of view affect matters of detail. And it is equally true, and equally remarkable, that such collisions of view do not separate any group of representative readers into high school teachers on the one side, and college teachers on the other. With regard to every angle of judgment from which a candidate's work may be viewed, one may always find secondary and college teachers championing a standard against other secondary and college teachers.

There are two points, however, upon which there is a preponderance of high-school or college opinion upon one side of a debated question. My sense of this situation arises not wholly from the discussion of principles in the conferences of the group of English readers for the Board, but from conversations with many teachers in both branches, and from observation of the results of high-school instruction.

The first point upon which the parting of opinion seems to represent roughly the separate aims of high-school and of college work is that of technical precision in composition. The interest of a high-school teacher in the greater possibilities of his work—particularly those which may reveal and develop the imaginative power of his students—may induce him quite naturally in some cases to stress the importance of originality and spirit, at the expense of mechanical correctness; and frequently a secondary teacher will insist on his right—in the larger view of things—to bring to light gifts of mind, rather than to spend any great part of his time upon conventions of form, such as accuracy

in spelling, system in punctuation, and "correctness" in sentence structure. My own mind is not sufficiently settled in its educational doctrine to decide whether or not such a teacher is meeting in the most reasonable and faithful way the duties of his post. It may be that from the point of view of the largest possible accomplishment in the secondary program he is doing what is precisely most serviceable socially. But I have no hesitation in voicing my sense of the propriety of a college entrance standard which calls for careful training in these matters of detail, because I feel that they have the most positive value in deciding a student's ability to carry college work successfully. I have only a limited respect for training of this sort as inculcating discipline or as setting a standard of literacy—for literacy is only one kind of good manners. But as a college instructor I have a substantial respect for a command of spelling because it is evidence of the memory and the observation that are needed in college work. I have no interest in punctuation as the mastery of a convention—to teach it as such is to neglect an educational opportunity—but I have the sharpest sense of its value as a test of the student's power to recognize the relations of ideas, an elemental consideration for those whose four years' business is to be concerned with ideas. Viewed critically, there is much that is merely frivolous in the rhetorical play with sentence forms; but if a man can not write a unified or coherent sentence, his mind does not work as it should. And a man's mind must work reliably in college. Let me emphasize my complete sense of the fact that it is only a minority of secondary school teachers who assert their freedom from obligation to follow up carefully the elementary training in matters of detail. My point is simply that where indifference to the technical requirement is expressed, it rarely, if ever, comes from the college teacher.

The second consideration upon which opinion splits in fair correspondence with the interests of the two groups of teachers, is the question of how far the English examination, in particular and without regard to the evidence of other examinations, should be viewed as a test of general intelligence. Here the college teachers as a rule take a positive stand. It seems to them a mistake that a student lacking in maturity or mental equipment should by persistency, or aided by the faithful effort of a teacher, gain admission to an environment where mental quality is the first thing desired. Their experience convinces them of the soundness

of their position; and most secondary teachers would fall in with their views, if they were satisfied that by intelligence their co-workers did not mean mere alertness or mental snap, and if they were satisfied, in the second place, that a competent judgment of intelligence could be based upon examination in a single subject. The whole problem is interesting in debate, but dangerous in experiment. In cases of actual disagreement as to the quantity or quality of intelligence a book exhibits, the decisions have very uniformly gone against the devil's advocate. It has been accepted as a matter of fairness that where teachers disagree as to the mental mastery shown in a book, it would be grossly wrong not to give the candidate the benefit of the doubt. After all, every examination is a test of mental quality; but there is in English often room for dispute as to the interpretation of the evidence.

I hope that what I have said has been accepted simply as a personal view. I have not attempted to speak *ex cathedra*, for in spite of a connection of some years with the Board, I feel that the most important of these questions have never been, and can never be, answered by the formulation of a definite policy. Neither the Board nor its workers are committed to an educational philosophy. As regards its critical function, the Board is in any particular year and in any particular subject simply the judicial consensus of its examiners and readers. As long as the balance of representation in these groups is as favorable as it is to the high-school interest, there can scarcely be a question of great or protracted disagreement between school and college teacher.

H. R. STEEVES

Columbia University.

EDITORIAL NOTES

IMPORTANT. With this leaflet goes a copy of the program of our nineteenth annual meeting to be held at the Boston Public Library on March 15. On that date the annual fee of one dollar is due. A yellow slip of paper, prepared by the treasurer, explains the situation. If you do not receive one of these yellow slips your dues are already paid. Owing to a somewhat depleted treasury it is quite essential that those who receive the slips fill them

out as soon as possible and mail with dues to Mr. A. B. DeMille, Milton Academy, Milton, Mass.

The general theme of the March meeting will be the problems presented to the teacher of English by the New Americans of New England who are pushing their way up from the lower social levels in rapidly increasing numbers. Particular attention will be paid to the seventh, eighth, and ninth years of school life, which represent at present the most vital, yet probably the weakest section in our educational line of defence.

At the December meeting in Boston the resignation of Mr. Charles Swain Thomas as Editor of our English Leaflet was formally announced. Mr. Orren Smith of the Girls' High School, Boston, then offered resolutions which were accepted and placed on record. Owing to lack of space we have been unable to print them until now. They were as follows:—

"With a sense of personal and professional loss, we, members of the New England Association of Teachers of English, wish to write into the records of this meeting our appreciation of the long, able, and inspiring service of Mr. Charles Swain Thomas, as Editor of the ENGLISH LEAFLET. By his resignation, and departure from New England, we realize that we have lost not only a painstaking editor of discriminating judgment and high professional ideals, but a sane and resourceful counsellor of our Association, whose discussions of the aims and methods of English teaching have been notable for their clarity of vision, inclusiveness of thought, and directness of expression.

Through his eight years as editor of the LEAFLET and by his constant service on the Executive Committee of the Association, he has broadened and brightened the course of English teaching in New England as few have been able to do. We gratefully acknowledge his services to us and to our Association, and, through us, to the youth of our day."

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